

My Third Speech: Training on How to Communicate With Nonspeakers

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Have you had to fight for your right to...communicate? The Beastie Boys railed about partying but I'm going to advocate for communicating. Specifically, I'm going to make the case that nonspeakers need better communication partners, and to be better communication partners, teachers working with nonspeakers need better training. Getting teachers to acknowledge that talking isn't the only way to share information or show intelligence, and to be patient in exchanges with nonspeakers, and to know how to help with spelling and typing, would be epic. So let's do it!

It's important to realize that communication is a challenge for many on the autism spectrum. According to Healthline Media, around 25 to 30 percent of children with autism are minimally verbal, meaning they speak fewer than 30 words, are unreliable speakers, meaning they often don't say what they mean, or they don't speak at all. A recent study looking at three national datasets of autistic elementary school students found that speech and language therapy was the most common therapy they receive, and 85% do. The University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities estimates that one-tenth of all students in special education classrooms use an Augmentative and Alternative Communication (or AAC) device.

Not only do these things cost a lot of money, they also add lots and lots and lots of stress onto school, which is stressful enough! My school district spends roughly 1.7 million dollars on speech and language services every year. That's in addition to approximately 6 million dollars on autism support. Some serious spending!! Actually it is really incredible. Let's just make sure it's spent as effectively as possible. And right now it isn't, at least not the portion spent on nonspeakers.

A blistering critique of AACs, specifically computerized ones, from 1996 had it right, that these devices add “complexity into an already complex situation: the education of a student with disabilities.” I can share from experience that they are so complicated to use but don’t let you actually communicate. Don’t we think communication is the whole point? I do! So let’s focus on the natural victories and play to nonspeakers’ strengths. That means the right communication tools and surrounding nonspeakers with well-trained communication partners.

The tools are easy; the training is hard. The only tools I’ve found helpful are a pencil and paper, a laminate, and a keyboard. But they work best if I’m working with a really good communication partner. This is huge! I can’t stress it enough how essential this is. Nonspeakers can only be heard if they’re communicating with someone who knows how to listen. And listening to a nonspeaker I’d say takes some getting used to. The good news is that we know just how it’s done.

According to Jennifer Kent-Walsh and David Mcnaughton, the list of skills and strategies include the “(a) use of extended conversational pause time or expectant delay...(b) being responsive to communicative attempts; and the c) use of open-ended questions.” These were published in 2005, the same year my sister was born. She’s now in college so why aren’t these better known by now?

The problem is the lack of appreciation for the communication partner role and even more the lack of training for it. The intermediate unit in my area, for example, offers two workshops on teaching students with autism. Neither one even mentions nonspeakers or how to be a good communication partner. How is that even possible? Missed opportunities mean serious consequences for nonspeakers, and that’s unacceptable!

So let’s change this!! To start, let’s spread the word about the C4A Academy Elizabeth Bonker created. The site includes information about teaching nonspeakers to type and, best of all, how to be a good communication partner. More information is available at the website on my slide. Be part of the presuming competence, nonspeakers-are-awesome revolution!! Thank you!!